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ABSTRACT

A brief analysis of several theories of language acquisition and of various methods of language instruction leads to a proposal of general guidelines to be used in the development of an experimental course in Latin for seventh-grade students. The author discusses the writings of Chomsky, Sweet, and Brooks and suggests the abandonment of methodology which is strictly based on an audiolingual or grammar-translation theory in favor of a modified program geared primarily to individualized instruction. (RL)

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AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING LATIN: PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Dennis M. Kratz

Most language teachers would agree that their primary goal is to impart to their students the ability to understand and communicate in a specific foreign tongue; but here the agreement stops. For what this ability entails, and how best to promote it, are problems which have thrown the profession into a period of agitated self-evaluation. In particular, widespread dissatisfaction caused by the failure of the so-called audio-lingual revolution to fulfill its initial promise has led to a renewed interest in exploring alternate modes of instruction.

Latin has, for the most part, occupied a position somewhere on the periphery of the turmoil. A traditional grammar-translation approach still dominates the discipline. The audio-lingual approach, up to now, has had too limited an impact to allow one to speak of any far-ranging reaction against its deficiencies. On the contrary, its influence is growing; for, despite its faults, the audio-lingual method remains the only real alternative to grammar-translation now available to American Latin teachers. As too often happens, the Classics, resistant to change and experimentation, are years behind everyone else.

I suggest that it is time to abandon both the grammar-translation and the audio-lingual methods in favor of a radically

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different approach to Latin.[1] Like the developers of the audio-lingual system, I base my program on an analogy between first and second language acquisition. The difference between these developers and myself lies in our models of language and how it is learned.

Before proceeding, however, I think it useful to discuss briefly the two methods for whose demise I will argue. The grammar-translation method has its roots in the need to justify the study of Latin after it ceased to be used as a means of communication among scholars. Academicians seized upon the notion of Latin as an "intellectual discipline", a tool to "train the mind" for all school subjects. To this singularly joyless outlook can be traced the pedagogical emphasis on grammatical analysis, memorization of paradigms and vocabulary lists, and the translation of set pieces (as opposed to original sentences created by the learner).

Grammar-translation courses, and the textbooks written for them, are invariably test oriented. To cite a recent example (Buehner and Ambrose 1969, p. vi):

> The material of this book is designed to prepare the student for the Alpha form of the NAIS examination.

The NAIS Alpha examination is typical of such standardized tests (as well as of most intervening quizzes given by the individual teacher) in its concern for the student's understanding of abstract grammatical principles; the accurate reproduction of specific inflections; and the ability to transverbalize Latin texts into English, and English sentences (chosen for grammatical complexity, not meaning) into Latin.

Beginning courses employing this method are characterized by detailed explications from the teacher to the students, followed by written exercises and drills applying the particular construction under investigation, and frequent quizzes. Often whole periods are devoted to reciting prepared English translations of Latin passages assigned as homework the previous day.

Even in this cursory outline, the faults of grammar-translation are apparent. (It may have recalled some unpleasant memories.) The student is locked into a passive role, expected to produce only what the teacher demands. Much of the work is simply boring. The use of Latin for communicative purposes plays no part in the process. Latin is merely a puzzle to be turned into the real language of the classroom: English.

The audio-lingual method was developed partly out of an understandable opposition to the influence on modern languages of the grammar-translation approach to Latin.[2] In broadest terms, the audio-lingual method is dually based on an operant-conditioning model of learning and a Bloomfieldian concept of language as patterning and habit. Its basic pedagogical assumption is that second language acquisition is a process involving the formation and performance of a complex of correct habits. In the words of Nelson Brooks (1960, p. 47):

> The single paramount fact about language learning is that it concerns, not problem-solving, but the formation and performance of habits.

This emphasis on conditioning and habit, with its concomitant rejection of any intellectual analysis, is reflected in such classroom procedures as mim-mem (student mimicry and memorization of the teacher's utterances) and the pattern drill. Pattern

drills, as Brooks has pointed out (p. 142) "make no pretence of being communication", but are aimed at (1) breaking down interference from first language habits and (2) providing the student with automatic manipulative control of specific language structures. In most pattern drills, the student is presented with a basic sentence and cues which he substitutes in specific slots. Although these drills were once hailed as an important innovation, they in fact do not, as Valdman has shown (1966, p. xix), differ substantially from the older conjugation and declension drills found in the grammar-translation method.

The audio-lingual method was eventually adapted to Latin, chiefly through the work of Waldo Sweet. His Latin: A Structural Approach, published in 1957, can be described as "orthodox audio-lingual." It stressed building up language skills one step at a time, with each new element not expected to require modifications to habits already implanted. Sweet has continued to perfect and modify his original text. Lately, he has even admitted to the existence of "problem solving" (Sweet, 1970-71, p. 129) as a factor in learning Latin. But he fails to elaborate either on the nature of this process or its function. And his latest programmed course, Artes Latinae, still relies exclusively on massive drills and habit formation through over-learning to give the student absolute control over a limited body of material.

The changes sponsored by Sweet have included many undeniably positive contributions to Latin instruction. Clearly of immense value is his insistence on Latin as Latin, something to be understood, and not merely translated. Among others can be listed the insistence on using Latin rather than learning about it; the

insight that sentence patterns are more important than isolated elements; and the replacement of vocabulary lists with contextual presentations. However, the overall accomplishments of Latin audio-lingual programs have been mediocre. Students seem to learn a supply of sentences which they can manipulate; but they do not acquire the essential capacity to deal with Latin creatively and efficiently as a communicative tool.

When Sweet began his work, the audio-lingual method was in step with contemporary notions of linguistics and psychology. Today such is no longer the case. Its linguistic assumptions have been attacked convincingly by Noam Chomsky (whose Syntactic Structures, ironically, also appeared in 1957). Chomsky argues that the idea of language as a series of conditioned responses is inadequate to account for the human ability to create and understand sentences never before encountered; language behavior is, in other words, stimulus-free and innovative. Chomsky elsewhere describes language as "rule-governed behavior." In simple terms, this means that a person who knows a language has formulated a finite set of rules which enable him to generate and interpret an infinite number of grammatical sentences. This internalized rule system represents the individual's linguistic competence -- as opposed to his performance, or specific utterances, at any given moment.

No teacher of Latin can afford to be ignorant of transformational generative grammar,[3] and its implications for the question of language acquisition. Previously, the dominant approach to this question had been within the framework of behaviorist

learning theory. In a behaviorist model (whose assumptions underlie the audio-lingual method), the burden is placed on the environment. Adults provide the input and reinforcement deemed necessary to establish certain vocal habits in the child, who is viewed primarily as a passive organism shaped by conditioning.

A superior alternative to this stimulus-response model for language acquisition is emerging from a period of intense activity in psycholinguistics.[4] Although the issue is by no means completely settled, it now appears that first language acquisition should be regarded as a biologically rather than environmentally based process. That is, despite vast differences in physical environment and upbringing, all children acquire their first language in accord with a genetically controlled developmental pattern.

The main departure of this new model from its behaviorist predecessor is clearly its shift of emphasis from the environment to the child. The "passive organism" is now regarded as active and creative. It is proposed that the child, from the earliest stage of his linguistic development, takes the informational input (the language which he hears) and evolves a hypothesis concerning the form sentences take in this language. He expresses this hypothesis in the form of his own sentences. After analyzing the feedback to his own sentences (plus new linguistic data), he modifies or amends the original hypothesis. Language acquisition, then, can be envisioned as a series of interim hypotheses which grow increasingly complex, the last of which will be the internalized adult grammar.

McNeill (1970), a proponent of the idea that children are born with a biologically-based innate capacity for language,

argues that this capacity takes the form of linguistic universals. These he equates with the basic principles of Chomskian grammar. (It has also been suggested that what is innate is less a content than a process of sorting linguistic data.) McNeill points out that little is known concerning the important problem of how a child's experience contributes to his acquisition of language. He continues (p. 105):

> What is known is largely negative: learning does <u>not</u> take place through imitation; overt practice with linguistic forms does <u>not</u> play a role....

Valdman, after surveying recent psycholinguistic literature, draws a similar conclusion. He rejects the theory that any activity resembling 'drills' (as used in audio-lingual and grammar-translation courses) plays a part in first language acquisition. Moreover, Oller and Obrecht (1968), who conducted experiments on the effect of pattern drills on second language acquisition, support what McNeill and Valdman imply (p. 174):

> ...mechanical, non-situational, non-communicative manipulation of slot-substitution or transformation drills is not consonant with the goal of linguistic competence...

In further support of the "hypothesis-construction" model of language learning, studies have shown that at any given point in development, a child's language reflects a self-contained internally consistent rule system which is not dependent on the full adult system (cf. C. Chomsky 1969, Klima and Bellugi 1966, Menyuk 1969). Children seem to be extremely sensitive to patterns in language and devise relationships with little trouble. Many of the mistakes, by adult standards, in children's speech result from the fact that their interim hypotheses tend to be

applied too generally. Modifications almost always involve the need to learn restrictions on relationships. (Parental corrections and expansions of the child's sentences apparently facilitate this type of learning.) In fact, especially in an inflected language (cf. Slobin 1966), the more specific the linguistic item, the later it tends to be learned. By way of contrast, both the grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches to Latin stress the accurate use of such specific constituents -- e.g., genders -- from the beginning.

I might note that the development of language outlined above follows a course similar to that described by Piaget for the development of other psychological schemata. They too are formed as a result of the continuous interaction of a creative organism with its environment. They are over-general at first and in need of restrictive revisions in the light of new information.

This new theoretical paradigm has important implications for the language teacher. To begin with, let us assume that an analogy between first and second language acquisition, even the acquisition of a 'dead' language like Latin, is worth pursuing.[5] A course based on this analogy would stress the creative use of language, in communicative interactions, rather than artificial repetition drills. Its concern would be the development of rules by the learner rather than his memorization of specific items. The course would be designed to allow the student to progress toward full competence by formulating a series of working hypotheses, which he would test by generating sentences of his own. Demands for modifications to a hypothesis would come from corrections and expansions of his sentences and from new linguistic data

provided by the teacher.

The student, if exposed to this method, would have to be allowed to produce sentences which are, by the criteria of a fully developed adult grammar, incorrect. These so-called ungrammatical elements, in a traditional school program are singled out for correction and not expected to be repeated. Cook (1969), for example, cites the case of a recent TESOL text which advises that the learners be discouraged from speaking "pidgin" English. The pidgin sentences noted include "black pencil no", "me cut paper no", and "Ghulam no give me glue". And yet, she points out, these examples reveal that the children are in fact producing negative sentences according to the same early rules which Klima and Bellugi found underlying the speech of native children. The first two sentences confirm to Klima and Bellugi's Stage One; the last, to Stage Two. Here a valuable clue of development is not merely ignored but even frowned on.

In my approach, on the other hand, errors would be viewed, in the context of the entire sentence, as evidence of the hypothetical target-language system which the student has formulated at a particular stage in the learning process (cf. Corder 1967). In other words, the student's systematic errors, as distinguished from random mistakes, reflect a transitional competence -- and a clue to the learning strategy of a particular individual. The teacher's task would be to use this evidence as a guide to selecting the next step (nature of correction, expansion, or new data) which is most likely to help the student toward increasingly complete and accurate hypotheses.

This attempt to give errors a positive, even central, role in Latin teaching represents my most distinctive break with previous methods. Both the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods are based on the punishment and avoidance of mistakes; for each, despite other differences, is founded on a strategy of building up competence step by step. The student taught by these methods is compelled to follow a pre-established route. Unexpected leaps of intuition are likely to be greeted by a variant of "We aren't studying that now" or (worse!) "You're not ready for that yet." But if children do not acquire their first language by such a linear, additive, rigid progression, why should they be forced to learn Latin that way?

The preceding discussion suggests, then, that in theory at least, certain benefits may result from a program which seeks to take advantage of the learner's natural proclivity for linguistic generalizations. But theoretical discussion in pedagogy is by its very nature incomplete. The final test of any program -- Does it work? -- takes place in the classroom; and our present state of knowledge of what happens in a learner's mind does not allow dogmatic claims for an untried method. Richard Jones (1968) has expressed our predicament well by noting that, in addition to knowing little about learning in general, educators lack specifically a theory of <u>instructed</u> learning. About the only position one can hold with assurance is that no single instructional method provides optimal learning for all students (Bracht 1970, p. 627):

> Given a common set of objectives, some students will be more successful with one instructional program and other students will be more successful

> with an alternative instructional program. Consequently, a greater proportion of students will attain the instructional objectives when instruction is differentiated for different types of students.

What I am presenting in this paper, therefore, is a framework for practical innovation, not a recipe for teaching Latin. Beginning September 1971, I will conduct an experimental course in Latin for seventh grade students at The Roxbury Latin School (West Roxbury, Massachusetts). To sum up, this course will be based on the following principles:

(1) Expose the students, from the beginning, to a wide range of linguistic data.

(2) Give the student opportunities to devise his own grammar, expressed in use, of Latin.

(3) Allow him to produce "ungrammatical" sentences, and use these to help him form a better grammar.

(4) Use Latin in communicative contexts. Avoid artificial drills.

(5) Above all, keep the course flexible, so that each student can find the language learning style which works with optimal effectiveness and efficiency for him. In other words, structure the learning environment, not the learner.

Future reports will include detailed descriptions of materials, classroom procedures, and the progress of the students (including a statement of the criteria used to evaluate that progress). Success in this experiment could help raise the quality of Latin teaching. Perhaps more important, it might stimulate among

teachers a thorough reconsideration of the role of error and inventive hypothesis in education.

NOTES

1. For another statement of the views expressed in this report, see my "Latin: A Challenge to the Structural Approach", forthcoming in Classical Journal. I am indebted to Dr. Karl Diller, of Harvard University, for helpin me in the initial stages of my investigations.

2. A detailed critical analysis of the audio-lingual method appears in Rivers 1964.

3. An admirable introductory text is N.R. Cattell's The New English Grammar, available in paperback from The M.I.T. Press. Little work has been done in applying transformational analysis to Latin. By far the most important study to date is Robin Lakoff's Abstract Syntax and Latin Complementation, published in 1968 by The M.I.T. Press.

4. An adequate review of any aspect of this involved field would require more space than is possible here. The reader desiring a fuller account of the recent psycholinguistic literature concerning language acquisition should consult Lenneberg 1967, McNeill 1970, and Smith and Miller 1966. McNeill's bibliography is particularly useful.

5. Rigorous studies, not only of the relative processes of learning English and Latin, but also of the relative processes of reading the two languages, are needed.

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